Artist’s statement: What decolonization of art means to me

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As an artist, my work has always been centered on Blackness; a majority of it has been about empowering, celebrating, and uplifting people through visual representation. Growing up being fascinated by art and later attending art school, I was always struck by the overwhelming absence of black faces either on or behind the canvas, at least as far as our curriculums and museums were concerned.

That is why the very act of presenting and centering Blackness is provocative. Nuanced and varied representations of black experiences are still relatively few and far between in Canada and its cultural landscape. Where these representations do exist, they are often filtered through the lens of two dimensional media representations and singular narratives about black life. I always think back to Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s brilliant TED talks about the dangers of only representing a single story:

“Show a people one thing, and only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.”

Over the past summer, two murals I worked on that sought to give representation to marginalized communities were defaced and destroyed. The incidents verified the not-always-subtle racial aggression endured by communities of colour, particularly those with intersectional identities. Both times the vandalism was motivated by anti-black sentiment, and in one case compounded
by transphobic sentiments. Both incidents illustrate the gap in how the black community experiences race versus how the larger mainstream society believes we experience race.

Both murals honoured the deceased, a fact that made the actions of the vandals shocking to some, though few of my racialized friends were surprised. It often feels like any organized attempt to spread empowerment, while pushing back against the historical structures of oppression within our communities, is met with backlash, be it Idle No More or Black Lives Matter. Some people prefer to maintain the status quo rather than challenge their own preconceptions, and the cost is too often the lives and futures of communities of colour.

Issues of race and privilege were already fermenting in Ottawa due to disputes over access to public art space. A group of young activists had put a large ‘Black Lives Matter’ statement on a well-known graffiti wall, prompting some members of the graffiti community to erase the statement and respond with an ill-advised quote from rapper ODB from Wu Tang Clan: “Wu Tang is for the Children.” This was accompanied by online comments from other local graff artists like, “take that shit back to the States.” The tone-deaf nature of this response, as well as the use of lyrics from Black artists being used to shut down Black voices, while using an art-form that has historical roots in the Black community, is all tinged with bitter irony.

As communities of color already know, race is not solely a national issue – my race does not change or disappear when I cross a border, so the assumption that the issues facing black people on one side of the border disappear on the other is dangerously misleading. The often-touted “shared values” Canadians speak about having with the United States are deeply rooted in the shared colonial history of violence and subjugation against non-European populations. Therefore, it should not be of any surprise that we also share a history of white supremacist ideologies that were and are explicitly anti-black and anti-indigenous. As Canadians, we have never been good at confronting our own history and instead seem to be more comfortable pointing to our neighbours as being much worse – divorcing their experience from ours in a claim to innocence.

It was against this backdrop that fellow artist Allan Andre and I decided to paint a tribute to Sandra Bland, an African-American woman and activist found dead in police custody in Texas three days after a wrongful arrest and incarceration for a simple traffic violation: failure to signal. The incident was very visceral to many, and a few days after news of her death broke we painted the mural to honour her life and spirit. It was very well received, immediately garnering positive attention and even prompting her family to reach out via social media to send us their gratitude and share in her remembrance.
However, as swiftly as our work garnered positive attention, it drew negative reactions. Overnight, the mural was defaced with the tagline ‘All Lives Matters’. This incident highlights the common discomfort felt by so many when blackness is centered in a conversation. Such is the nature of anti-black racism in our community. The fact that we must continually explain and justify that Black Lives Matter does not negate the importance of any other life again and again is almost as unbearable as suffering in silence.

This incident was not isolated. The following month, I received an invitation from a group of party promoters called the Queer Mafia to paint a mural during Ottawa Pride Weekend. We collectively decided to do a mural to honour transgendered women of color, one of the most disproportionately targeted communities who face exceptionally high levels of violence and marginalization. This issue was particularly relevant, given the recent death of Sumayah Dalmar, a 26-year-old Somali Canadian trans woman from Toronto who was found dead this past February 2015. Her death along with so many others remains unresolved. The mural included the names of the 21 other trans women of colour who lost their lives this past year.
Still, this was not enough to prevent a tasteless and downright malicious attack on the mural. This time, along with the tagline ‘All Lives Matters’, the language was overtly offensive and threatening with statements such as ‘you’ve been warned’ sprawled across the piece.

The common thread for the murals, besides the vandalism, was that when things looked darkest an amazing group of allies – people from diverse communities including white, black and indigenous folks, came together to fix it. Each time the vandalism took place, they were there with paint and rollers. They stood guard to prevent further targeting. The solidarity that was fostered between communities during these incidents was the thin but very important silver lining. The development of cross-community links, which can be called upon in future situations, means our voices will not go unheard.

On a personal level, the centering of blackness in my work means that I am by default excluded from certain circles of repute in the art world, especially if the work is not presented within the confines of the European and Western traditions of fine art.

Our definition of what is considered to be ‘art’ in Western society needs to be fully unpacked. Western art is egoistic, elitist, individualistic, and market driven with a focus primarily on form. This is in direct contrast to Indigenous or non-Western forms of artistic practice, which generally views art as communal, non-commercial, functional and holistically integrated into the daily practice and lives of people. In the Western world, art is relegated to special spaces and institutions, sterile environments removed from the common person. The 1980’s and 90’s saw the emergence of global financial institutions such as banks and insurance companies becoming major players in the international arts scene. Combined with auction houses that literally get as much money as possible for artwork, they have had considerable influence in prioritizing return rates on investments as they key determinant of ‘good’ art.

Art needs to be decolonized. The process has already begun in a growing number of communities where people of color have challenged the European values driving the corporate
globalization of art. This is being done in a number of ways, including reclamation of priceless artifacts and culturally significant pieces looted during the colonial era, and vocally objecting to and demanding an end to the various forms of appropriation of cultural dress, motifs, and practices. This is especially true in Indigenous communities, and has been made easier by technology in our increasingly interconnected world.

With the defacement of my murals, I have been able to reflect on our rigid definition of art and the ways in which its place in our society is used to control both the artist and the message. In particular, the experience has highlighted the issues of access to public spaces for art. The onerous process of gaining approval and permission, permits for equipment, maintenance and insurance agreements, as well as meeting bylaw regulations means that securing space for a piece of public art – especially one that is rooted in issues that affect communities of color and Indigenous communities – is nearly impossible. Without the privilege of an educational background, an established practice and the time, resources or support required to go through the process, gaining access to funding and space is extremely limited.

It is not surprising that so many artists of color and Indigenous artists forgo this process completely. However, the consequence is that our work is not represented and elevated to the same status and prominence as many of our white counterparts. It is only through social media campaigning, strong media attention, grassroots organizing and the extreme fortune of having the ear of sympathetic city officials that I was able to secure a permanent home to repaint the Trans Women of Color mural. It is interesting to think about what the outcome would have been if this mural had not been defaced and I had simply proposed it through the normal funding channels. I strongly doubt I would have received the approval to create a similar piece.

Most importantly, through my experience, I have realized that when you create art in the community and for the community, the community takes ownership of it. The community fixed the murals, and prevented the work from further damage. They brought the attention of the media, petitioned local government, and supported me through difficult circumstances. Most importantly, they went out and created more art of their own. This is what the decolonization of art means to me.